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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 GUATEMALA 002889

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [EATD](#) [PHUM](#) [GT](#)

SUBJECT: BERGER AND COLOM BEGIN SECOND ROUND CAMPAIGN; FRG  
DOES WELL IN CONGRESS AND MUNICIPALITIES

Classified By: PolCouns David Lindwall for reason 1.5 (b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary: Guatemalan voters turned out in history-making numbers on November 9 to say "no" to General Rios Montt's presidential bid, but gave his FRG a large bloc in Congress and a majority of the municipalities. Preliminary vote results, with 94% of tables counted, give Berger 35% of the vote, followed by Colom with 27% and Rios Montt with 19%. The FRG has reacted to its defeat with relative silence, though two party leaders said that the FRG would concentrate its efforts on the legislative and municipal fronts in expectation of the 2007 elections. Challenges to the vote are expected in some municipalities, and the FRG is talking about filing an injunction against the results in Guatemala City, although we expect it realizes a challenge would not prosper. Berger and Colom have already begun the second round campaign. There is a palpable sense of relief throughout Guatemalan society that the General is no longer a contender. End summary.

#### The Presidential Vote

2. (U) With 94.4% of the votes counted, GANA coalition candidate Oscar Berger consolidated his hold on first place in Guatemala's November 9 presidential election with 34.6% of the vote. Alvaro Colom, who will face off against Berger in a runoff election on December 28, received 26.5%. FRG candidate Efraim Rios Montt came in a distant third with 19.2% of the vote, and PAN candidate Leonel Lopez received 8.3%. Berger was the big winner in Guatemala City (49%), but the provinces were split with Colom and Rios Montt taking much of the indigenous western highlands, and Berger and Colom splitting the Spanish-speaking provinces of the south coast and eastern Guatemala.

#### Record Voter Turnout

3. (SBU) Preliminary reports indicate that 58% of registered voters cast a ballot on November 9. Since many intending voters were either discouraged by the long lines or were not able to vote because of problems with the voter registry, actual voter turnout was even higher. Voter turnout only reached 46.2% in 1999 and 53.3% in 1995. The high voter turnout in this election (coupled with the low vote for the FRG) is widely interpreted as motivated by voters' determination to punish the FRG for its corruption and poor performance on the economy and crime during its four years in office. The elections will have to be held again in eight small municipalities where ballots were burned on election day. The results of those new elections will affect only their own municipal races.

#### FRG Takes First Place in Congress and Municipal Elections

4. (U) Preliminary results show the FRG winning 42 seats in Congress (out of 158), giving it the single largest bloc. The GANA coalition (made of three parties) won 49 seats, but it is not clear if these parties will eventually form one bloc, as in some Departments the GANA parties ran competing candidates. UNE (the party of second place presidential candidate Alvaro Colom) won 33 seats, followed by center-right parties PAN with 16 seats and Unionistas with 6. The far left party ANN expanded its presence to 6 legislators at the expense of the far left URNG, which lost all but two of its seats. Preliminary vote counts also show the FRG winning 37% of the mayoral races, compared to 25% for the GANA coalition and 11% for UNE. The legislative and municipal vote counts are still preliminary, and there may be some variation once the vote counts are final.

#### FRG Reaction to Their Electoral Defeat

5. (SBU) The FRG has been relatively silent following the announcement of the overwhelming defeat of its presidential candidate. Rios Montt himself has not spoken. Vice Presidential candidate Edin Barrientos told reporters that the FRG will not comment until the final votes are counted, but said the FRG would respect the will of the voters. Congressional majority leader Aristides Crespo told reporters that the FRG would continue to be an important political force in the country, and would use its large bloc in Congress to "defend the interests of the people."

Congressman Haroldo Quej told reporters that the FRG is considering the possibility of filing an injunction against the election results in Guatemala City, alleging that many FRG voters were not allowed to vote because of "manipulation of the voter registration list," but the FRG has not initiated any action so far (Note: injunctions are filed in all Guatemalan elections against some results, especially at the municipal level, but these tend to be pro forma ways of objecting to the outcome, and rarely result in recounts. End note).

16. (C) FRG leaders delayed responding to our early attempts to meet with them to gauge their reaction to the elections; however, we will be meeting with Zury Rios, Antonio Arenales and Minister of Finance Eduardo Weymann on November 13.

TSE Congratulates Itself, While Editorials Criticize it

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17. (U) President of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) Bolanos held a press conference on November 10 to say that the TSE was "profoundly pleased" with the organization and carrying out of the elections. Editorials in all the newspapers uniformly criticized the TSE for poor planning, which led to eight-hour long lines at many tables, leading many intending voters to go home without voting. They also criticized the TSE for the large number of errors in the voter registration list and problems in the application of the indelible ink (many voting table officials had tissue on hand to enable voters to dry their fingers, and this resulted in stains that were barely noticeable).

Berger and Colom Begin Their Second Round Campaigns

18. (U) With seven weeks left before the second round election, GANA candidate Berger and UNE candidate Colom have already begun their second round campaigns. Colom met with representatives of the nine losing small parties in an attempt to win their support in the second round. A smear campaign has already begun against Colom, through the media and e-mails, accusing him of being an alcoholic and of being an ally of the FRG.

Comment:

19. (C) There is a palpable sense of relief throughout Guatemalan society that the elections were held with a minimum of violence and that General Rios Montt will not be a contender in the second round. The 2003 elections put an end to 20 years of Rios Montt's pivotal role in Guatemalan politics. The large margin between second place candidate Colom and third place Rios Montt all but slammed the door on any intentions the FRG might have had to contest the national results. The results of the Congressional and municipal elections ensure that the FRG will remain an important political force in Guatemala and preserve its space for the 2007 elections, but it will not have the strength on its own to block legislative initiatives of the new government that require a two-thirds majority. Berger and Colom will both need the legislative support of the other to govern Guatemala after January 14, 2004, and we are using our initial, post-election contacts with both to impress upon them the need to run a clean second round campaign that preserves their ability to work with each other after the final election.

HAMILTON